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LECTURE ON ELOCUTION,

PARTICULARLY WITH REFERENCE TO

THE ART OF READING;

DELIVERED,

AGREEABLY TO APPOINTMENT,

BEFORE

THE NORTH CAROLINA

INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION,

AT THEIR

ANNUAL MEETING,

JUNE 20th, 1832.

BY HENRY S. ELLENWOOD, ESQ.

NEWBERN:

PRINTED BY JOHN I. PASTEUR.

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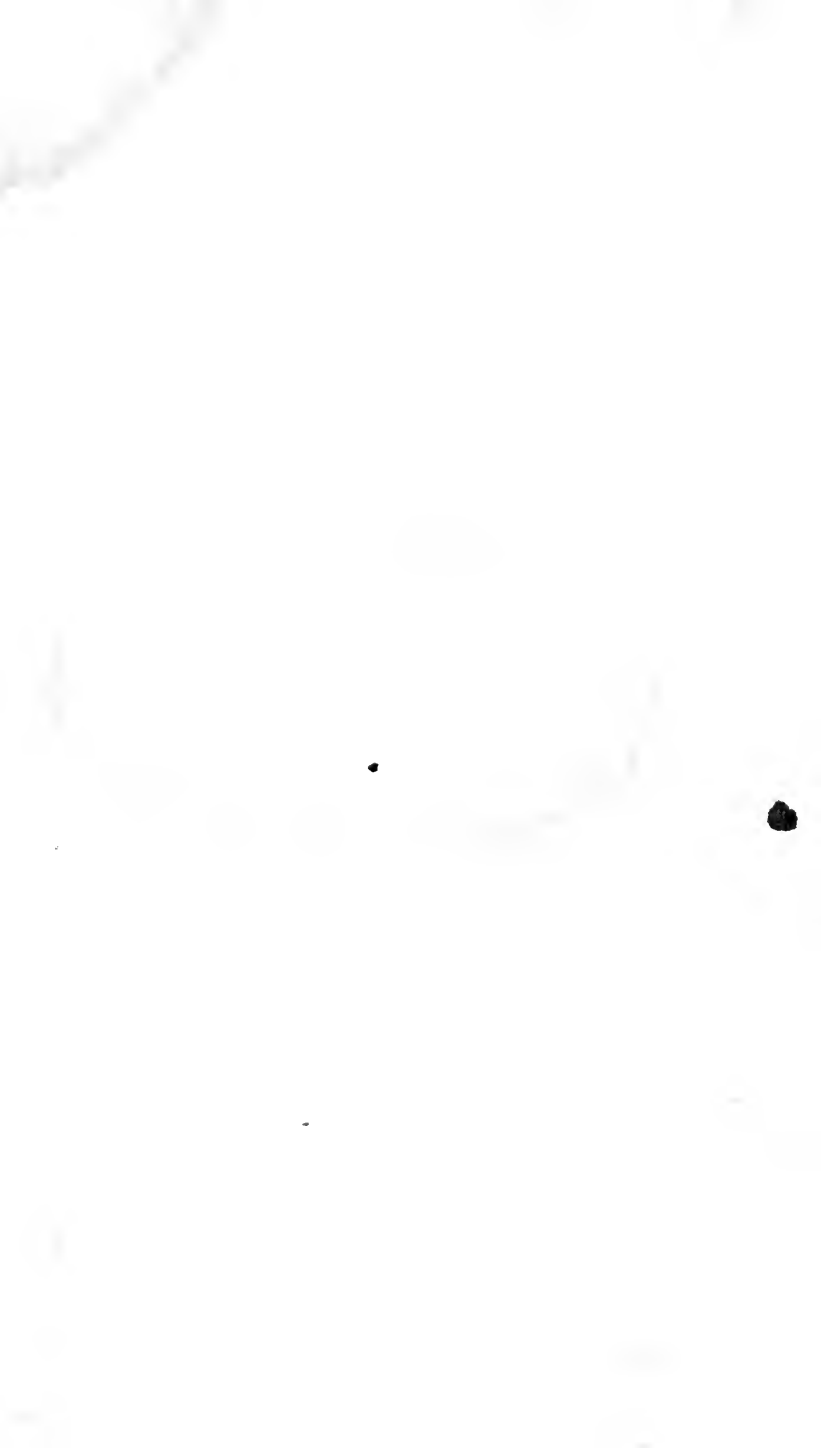
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LECTURE, &c.



It is hoped, Mr. President, that few persons have come hither, on this occasion, for the sole purpose of being entertained. The affairs of schoolmasters are always of a grave character; and the business of instruction is calculated, perhaps, least of all, to afford amusement. In the very humble part, which, by the invitation of our Committee, I am now called upon to enact, it is felt that much indulgence ought to be bespoken for want of due preparation, as well as much patience solicited for unavoidable dulness. Our auditors should bear in mind, that in the circle in which an instructor figures, he is an undoubted despot, whose nod is law, and whose edicts are irreversible. Respect and obedience wait upon his commands. His opinions are never disputed, nor is the profundity of his wisdom and knowledge ever supposed to be fathomable. The homage which is freely tendered, or rigidly exacted from his subjects, inspires him with lofty notions of his own sufficiency;

“ While still they gaze, and still the wonder grows,

“ That one small head can carry all he knows.”

But, removed, as he now is, from his appropriate sphere; his birchen sceptre temporarily laid aside, and no longer talking and acting as one having authority; but, on the contrary, himself subject to the scrutiny of his equals, perhaps his superiors; the novelty and awkwardness of his situation may be imagined to be somewhat oppressive. In this presence he resembles the student who is undergoing an examination; has all his hopes and apprehensions; and, like him, deprecates the severity of criticism, and invokes kindness of judgement. In this trial, however, he is supported by two considerations: 1st. that he shall soon return to his consequential domination, which has been suspended only, not

abandoned; and 2dly, that they, who now preside as his judges, having themselves *once* trembled before a single teacher, can hardly be entirely divested of awe, while beholding, as here, a congregation of pedagogues.

The subject assigned to me by the Committee, it will be remembered, is "Elocution, with particular reference to the teaching of Reading." There seems to be no necessity that the word be here any further defined than has already been done for me; and it may be expected that I confine myself chiefly to that part of the subject which especially relates to the proper utterance of words, or to the manner in which they should be delivered in sentences.

For the sake of convenience, sir, the importance of a correct manner of reading will be first considered.

2dly. The present condition of the art of Elocution, and the manner of teaching it.

3dly. Such improvements will be suggested as appear to be practicable, and to be demanded by our present wants.

With respect to the *importance* of good reading, there is probably only one opinion; but, so great is the variety of tastes, to say what it really is, and what constitutes it may not be so easy a matter. It is rare to find a person who can read at all, that does not conceive himself to read well; though it sometimes happens otherwise; and in general it will be found, that such even as are unable to articulate their syllables distinctly; such as stammer or stutter, or have some other impediment, are most addicted to read aloud, from a vain desire of exhibiting their supposed *ability* in this matter. A good reader we may with propriety consider him who is deemed to be such by others, rather than by himself; for it may be doubted if we are able to determine the existence or non-existence of this capacity in ourselves, any more than whether we possess a musical voice, agreeable manners, or personal beauty.

The good reader, like the correct and forcible speaker, is, then most eloquent, when, engrossed by his subject, and intent only upon the sentiments he delivers, he forgets himself, and has not leisure to turn his thoughts upon the operations of his own mind, and far less upon his external manners. The bad reader, with his finger on the line, and his head moving from

the beginning to the end of it, is wholly employed upon the words. He enters not into the feelings and spirit of his author. To him the commonest remark, and the noblest burst of enthusiasm, are the same thing, and are both pronounced in the same dull and monotonous manner. He exhibits no variety in emphasis or cadence, in tone or inflection; and at the close of his labour, which can be ascertained only by his closing the book, has neither communicated nor received instruction or entertainment. Good reading may be compared to certain mathematical diagrams, which, by means of curves and angles tastefully combined and continually varying, delight the eye; a delivery of an opposite kind, to the direct line, which a single glance is sufficient to apprehend, and which is not the more agreeable when infinitely extended.

To remark, sir, that speech is a distinguishing characteristic of the human species, were to express a mere truism. But it may not be considered quite so commonplace to observe, that by nothing is the degree of mental culture more distinctly evidenced, than by the tones of the voice, and the peculiar manner of utterance. Who, that should listen to the conversations of a well-educated citizen, and an untutored rustick, could mistake the one for the other? And what ignorant or half-instructed person would fail to expose himself, in good company, by reading aloud even a half column from a newspaper?

But, sir, a correct and agreeable manner of reading is of far less importance, in relation to others, than to the individual reader himself. A person may be physically incapable of a distinct and proper utterance; and yet he may have a mind susceptible of high cultivation, and be as much advantaged as others by judicious instruction in Elocution. The last purpose, sir, for which any branch of literary knowledge should be either communicated or sought, would appear to be that of mere display. Utility ought to be the end kept in view: and the question to be proposed to ourselves, when engaged in the study of any art or science, should be, what solid good is to be derived from this? rather than, How will it make us *appear* to advantage?

It has been remarked that the ability to read well is of more importance to its possessor than to others. In general, such

as may be denominated *reading persons*, peruse volume after volume in silence and retirement. Not a whisper is heard, nor a movement of the lips discovered. Yet, when thus employed, their *mental utterance* (if the expression be allowable) exactly resembles that which is audible. They *seem to hear* the precise pronunciation, tones, emphasis and cadences which would have been given to the same words if read aloud: and this reading is performed with vastly more rapidity than that which requires the voice; because the mind can *conceive* more expeditiously than the organs of speech can *express*. Is it not then a matter of importance *how* this, by far the greatest quantity of all reading and study, is performed?

Books, sir, constitute the great reservoir of all the learning that has ever existed; and they are destined to keep in store the discoveries of all the times to come. They serve also as imperishable memorials of the illustrious instructors and benefactors of our race. Various as are the languages in which they are written, they furnish to the able reader, and to him only, the means of understanding them. And the subjects upon which they treat, include every thing that can concern us as intellectual, moral, and immortal beings. To have an adequate idea, therefore, of the immense *number*, and inestimable *value* of books, is to be able to appreciate justly the ability to read them with ease and propriety.

With respect, sir, to the way in which young persons are *now* taught the art of Reading (which is what we proposed next to consider,) it is to be regretted that nothing favourable can be alleged. As far as can be known, even children are permitted, in this particular, to be their own instructors, without much interference on the part of teachers. The opinion of the erudite Mr. Cade, that, while "eating and drinking are acquired abilities, reading and writing are gifts of nature," seems, in a great degree, to have obtained. Orthography, (such as it is,) receives every where, if not so much as it deserves, at least a liberal share of attention. By some means or other, the most unlettered have imbibed a profound respect for the mysterious art of spelling; perhaps because, as it happens to be the *first* step on the ladder of science, it is the only one with which they have the honour of

an acquaintance. This respect is peculiarly fortunate ; for there is no telling what would become of us if we could not spell. In reading lessons, it is rare that the teacher feels himself called upon to do more than to check a too rapid manner, to correct a word miscalled, and to insist upon a loud voice ; and their pupils grow up under the impression that nothing further is requisite. He may possibly require them to take more *pains* in their lessons, to study with more *care*, to *endeavour* to improve themselves ; but he furnishes no means for this purpose ; he gives no intelligible directions ; he sets no example ; nor are they able to discover what is meant by good reading. To the *school books*, also, we may look, for yet another cause of the little progress in this branch of learning. These are generally purchased at the nearest village, or store, with very little regard to their fitness, so they be cheap, and embellished with ridiculous pictures. The proper selection of books is of much more importance than is commonly thought. *They* teach the teachers ; they are always conceived to be correct ; and from the book there is no appeal. Webster's famous "standard of pronunciation," was obliged, long ago, to give place to better competitors, in all the northern cities, and every where else, when people have investigated its demerits. But, like the inhabitants of its native region, being endued with the spirit of emigration, it has probably established itself forever in the South. Nor is there, among us, any lack of works more particularly indigenous, which, though compiled by persons notoriously destitute of qualifications to direct even the first footsteps of children, are yet forced into fashion by recommendations, coerced by importunity or pity, from *such* as occupy the high places of learning !

It was proposed, sir, to suggest, in the third place, such improvements as seemed to be at once practicable and adapted to our wants.

That the duty of an instructor comprises something more than the mere hearing of a lesson, "without note or comment," will not be *here* denied : and yet we have asserted that this is nearly all which is done in most of our common schools. In the other departments of learning, such as Grammar, and Geography, and Arithmetick, were he thus a

spectator only, a mere "looker on in Venice," as respects the lessons, it would be difficult to conceive how the "very reverend and honourable fraternity of Schoolmasters," as Mr. Dilworth quite civilly denominateth them, could be otherwise efficient, than as valiant wielders of the ferula and the rod, for the punishment and reclamation of refractory spirits.

The first object that demands the attention of parents and teachers, when a child is sent to school, is the selection of a primer, or first book. This should be of a small size, that the pupil may have the gratification of soon getting through it; and legibly printed, on good paper, that each letter may distinctly appear. The spelling lessons should, of course, be, at first, as simple and easy as possible, and increased in difficulty by slow degrees; and till the present lesson is mastered, another should not be required of him. Reading lessons ought by all means to accompany the spelling ones, beginning with syllables of two letters only, and taking care to graduate the one by the other. In this way, may reading be taught along with orthography with manifest advantage to both; and if the teacher will condescend to take part in these lessons, i. e. to read and spell them himself, at least occasionally, his little charge will be much encouraged in his progress. To supervise these first endeavours of a child in the acquisition of knowledge; to adapt one's *stride* to *his* slow and hobbling *step* over the *threshold* of learning, is unquestionably on the part of some instructors, a descent from high things to low. But it is as possible to stoop with dignity, as to rise with feeling: and "teacher even of babes" will be less likely to provoke the contempt of liberal philosophers than of such as are themselves profound in little that is beyond the alphabet.

The primer having been gone through, the next may be the spelling book; and in this, as in the preceding, the reading lessons must go in hand with the spelling. They should be repeated again and again, and not left for those in advance till they become easy, and well understood. Whenever a word is misaccentuated, whenever the proper emphasis is omitted, or misplaced, the instructor, by his own example, should set the matter right. Upon his entrance into this

second book, the pupil should be taught the peculiar forms of the six stops, or points, and their use; and he should be required to name them, as they occur in his lessons from time to time, till they become as familiar to him as any of the letters. When it is considered that these stops meet us in every sentence that we peruse, it cannot but be thought surprising, that the great majority, even of good readers are not ashamed to be totally ignorant of punctuation. Because these stops are small things, they are erroneously supposed to be insignificant. The blame of this should be shared between the school books and the teachers: for when the former asserts that a comma requires a pause while we may count one; a semicolon while we count two; it conveys but little useful information. The naming of the stops in reading will make them, after a while, thoroughly intelligible; and will besides, coerce the student to moderate his course, if he incline to read too fast—the most common, as well as the most difficult fault into which learners fall.

At the hazard of being tedious, sir, I will dwell a moment longer upon the subject of punctuation; because a right understanding of it is conceived to be an almost indispensable requisite in a correct style of reading. Instead of requiring mere pauses, then, the principal use of the stops is, to mark the places at which simple sentences terminate, and the clauses of compound ones diverge; and they demand rather appropriate tones or inflections of voice. These inflections are but two in number, the rising and the falling, and they are indicated by the acute and grave accents. When explained and illustrated, experience has proved that these are not beyond the understanding even of children. Nearly as soon as the learner is able to comprehend that a number of words may be so arranged as to make sense, he will perceive or can be made to perceive, the frequent recurrence of the stops. If at this time his attention be not drawn to them; if they are permitted to be habitually *skipped*, as the school phrase is, will he be likely afterward to look upon them as worthy of notice? But if they are called by their names in reading, if they are properly remarked on and explained, he will always remember, that, like every other thing in his book, they are not without use and significancy. In this

way to teach punctuation, together with reading, may possibly make the latter somewhat more laborious; but not so much more so as at first would seem. And the instructor who shall make the experiment, will find, even in a short time, abundant encouragement to adopt the practice.

Of the six stops, three of them, viz: the semicolon, colon, and period, require always the falling inflection; which is that peculiar tone of the voice denoting a sentence to be finished. To this rule, at once simple and comprehensive, the exceptions, in books correctly printed, are surprisingly few; and it would be difficult to point out one, the observance of which would contribute more to the facility of delivery and to the perspicuity of sentences.

Of the comma, which is the stop in most frequent use, the learner should be told that it can never, with propriety, have the falling inflection. It indicates only a suspension, or diversion of the sense; and sometimes requires a short pause.

The note of exclamation, and the interrogative point, challenge, in their management, much more care and judgment, since they cannot be brought within the operation of *few* rules, but require many. These meet us in reading more seldom than the others; and as learned doctors themselves might disagree in matters involving much discrimination, any positive directions in these premises, will not be expected.

Leaving now the dull, and seemingly trivial subject of stops and marks, with which the student may be supposed to be tolerably acquainted, we may next put into his hands a book of promiscuous Reading Lessons, and a Dictionary. And here, if the poor fellow have been drilled according to Webster's rules for new recruits, which are found in no books but Webster's, his progress in learning must inevitably be "an advance backwards;" in other words, he must unlearn a considerable part of what he has been taught, both in orthoepy and spelling. His *chambers* must be *changed* to *chambers*; his *angels* must be hurled from their spheres; his banished *K* must be recalled to the *publick*; and *U*, sir, be brought back again to *honour* and *favour*.

The subject of modern school books would not again be adverted to, were it not for the multitudes of them that are

almost daily obtruded upon us, their general worthlessness, and an exaggerated impudence of their pretensions. The mere titles of the works on education, even of American manufacture, which modestly arrogate to themselves the merit of supplying important *desiderata*, would fill volumes. We have "Sure Guides," and "Geographies Made Easy," and "Ready Reckoners," and "Improved Grammars," and "National Readers," world without end; every one of which is vastly preferable to all others on the subject that the world has seen, as is fully proved by certificates of recommendation from scores of sapient Divines and Professors, Governors and Judges, Squires of high and low degree, most potent grave and Reverend Preceptors of Academies, and particularly by those most capable of forming a just judgement, the learned and disinterested authors themselves! The grand stimulus to such stupendous attempts to enlighten and benefit the age, is unquestionably *pecuniary profit*; but this is not the *only* stimulus. There is, sir, in many minds, possibly in all, a covetous desire of everlasting fame, a "yearning after immortality," a propensity to cast "longing, lingering looks behind." One's name on the title page, even of a mere selection or spelling book, has an imposing appearance, and may be read to one's honor and glory, a hundred years to come. There is no telling how various are the paths by which "low ambition" travels to petty distinction; nor would his career be worthy of the least regard, were he not busy in elbowing his betters out of their places. It may well be questioned, sir, if the modern elementary formularies and text books can justly claim superiority to those in vogue fifty years ago. In these, alteration has pressed upon the heels of alteration, while improvement has rarely been obtained. The works of Mr. Lindley Murray, a countryman of our own, and an honor both to his own and to his adopted country, are certainly meant to be exempted from any share of that rebuke which some other publications may be thought to deserve. His grammar owes, probably, whatever deficiency in method, and incompleteness in execution may be supposed to characterize it, as much to the extent and difficulty of the subject as to his want of ability; and is, on the whole, the best practical treatise extant. The English Reader, which

has long had a wide circulation in both hemispheres, still retains its unprecedented popularity in all places where no little great man's selection supplants it, throughout the immense space, perhaps, of a whole county! The materials of the Reader, having been drawn from the purest fountains of English literature, with such delicacy as in no degree to disturb the sediment, may be presented to the young without danger of vitiating the taste, or intoxicating the brain; and how often soever they are used, they seem to have always a new and agreeable flavour. It would not be easy, either to assign sufficient reasons for the exclusion of this book from our schools, or to prove, satisfactorily, that a better substitute, in the main, can be adopted. When there is no obvious and certain advantage to be gained by the change of *one* class book for another similar in kind, the old ought not to be discarded, if for no better reason, because the instructor, being more familiar with its contents, will be better qualified to rectify any mistake into which the student may fall. There is no doubt, that from the works of the most eloquent English writers, a hundred volumes might be compiled, in all respects as well calculated for proper lessons in elocution as those of the Reader. But we have no need of them. Being well provided for we can more profitably avail ourselves of the facilities we have, than spend our time in nothing else but to discover and adopt "some new thing."

Upon his entrance into the Reader, the student should, from time to time, be referred to the excellent directions found in the introduction. These were taken, chiefly, from Sheridan's Lectures on Elocution, and are divided into short sections, embracing "proper loudness of voice, distinctness, due degree of slowness, propriety of pronunciation, emphasis, tones, pauses, and the manner of reading verse. The limits of a single lecture will not permit that these matters be separately considered, as their importance justly deserves. It must, therefore, suffice merely to refer to them, and to lament that they have been able, hitherto, to attract, in so small a degree, the careful attention of teachers. In a note appended to the first chapter of the Reader, the author informs us that he has there "exhibited sentences in a great variety of construction, and in all the diversity of punctuation;"

which, "if well practised upon, he presumes will fully prepare the young reader for the various pauses, "inflections and modulations, that the succeeding pieces require."

The orthoepy, or pronunciation of words, introduced by Walker, has become standard in all our higher institutions, and should be the only one acknowledged as authority in common schools. This pronunciation, however, having not yet been adopted by the great mass of unlettered people, requires for that reason, the particular attention of the instructor. The student ought frequently to be sent to his dictionary, with the key to which, as well as with all the vowel marks and accents, he should be made thoroughly acquainted. The authority and consequent usefulness of this admirable work are sometimes considerably impaired by the teacher's non-conformity with a few of its peculiarities. He abides by Walker in the main, but does not approve of him in some instances; he cannot bring himself to prefer *sky* and *leisure* and *pour*, to *sky* and *leisure* and *pour*. There may be a spice of vanity in this independence of opinion, and there can be little question that, on the whole, it were better in all cases to submit implicitly to good authority than to "be carried about with every wind of doctrine."

It would seem, sir, that the hearing of lessons in reading individually, rather than by classes, might be attended with advantage. Let the student, who is sufficiently advanced, be allowed the privilege too, of selecting his own lesson. This should be read near the teacher's table, unless his voice be low and faint: in which case, the most distant part of the school room will be his proper place. In choosing his lesson, it will soon be discovered, that he has his favourite pieces, which he will naturally endeavour to pronounce in the best manner he is able: And if he often choose the same piece, his increasing acquaintance with it, will cause it to be somewhat improved upon every repetition. It were better, also, that a considerable proportion of the reading lessons be in verse; and better still, if, being committed to memory, they be read or spoken occasionally, at least, without book.

With regard to declamatory exercises in school, unless judiciously adapted to the capacities of young persons, or permitted to the best readers only, they had better be seldom

introduced, or wholly omitted ; unless, as rarely happens, the teacher be peculiarly qualified to instruct in such matters. And it is especially doubtful if the spouting of humorous pieces, for which most declaimers have a high relish, is, in any good degree, auxiliary to the acquirements of a correct and tasteful Elocution.

I will trouble you, sir, with but one suggestion more on the subject of improving the present methods of teaching the art of Reading ; and this is, that the instructor himself read daily, a short lesson at least, and a long one if he can, to his pupils ; while *they* shall be required to supervise *him*, and correct *his* mistakes. A schoolboy is always delighted to have the power of retorting upon his teacher ; and to acquire this power, he will look over him, while reading, with attention and vigilance. By this plan, an excellent opportunity is afforded for *exemplifying*, not only what is considered good reading, but also all the faults and blunders, into which the heedless are apt to fall. "*Iter est breve per exempla*," said Seneca long ago ; and the truth is corroborated by all experience. I am confident, that whoever shall attempt to reduce this hint to practice will have reason to be pleased with his success. Indeed it seems to me there is no way by which a student may be more thoroughly, and expeditiously, and agreeably instructed, than by his teacher's participating with him, as far as possible, in all his pursuits ; sympathizing with him in all his difficulties, entering into all his feelings, and amalgamating, as it were, his own mind with that of his pupil.

I will delay you, sir, but a moment longer.

If, in what has been thus imperfectly advanced, there shall have been discovered nothing that is new, no feeling, sir, of regret or mortification will be indulged. The path in which the flowers and the thorns of knowledge are to be met with, having been trodden for thousands of years, must necessarily be true : but it is the old way, the tried way, the safe way ; and they may assuredly be suspected of presumption, who would block it up, and allure our feet into new directions. At this seat of science, it is gratifying to enter a firm, though humble protest, against, not only those innumerable educational books which innovate upon the established theories of teaching ; but against all those time-saving plans, schemes

and systems of instruction, to which these times have given birth, and which have nothing to recommend them but that they are of yesterday. Ages ago it was declared, that there is *no* short road to knowledge ; yet how many are now days wandering out of their way in search of it ! Are we not now told that English Grammar may be thoroughly learned in seven weeks ? Astronomy in a couple of lectures ? Pennmanship in three days ? And as for Arithmetick, the modern inductive method dispenses with all rules, and declares a war of extermination even against slates and pencils !

But, with all these boasted improvements, will it be pretended, sir, that genuine learning is really in a more prosperous condition ? Are we indeed better penmen and grammarians and geographers and arithmeticians than were our fathers ? or may we not say, with reference to these things, “ that the former times were better than these ? ”

It is perhaps a good rule, to look with suspicion upon all attempts to substitute, for what has been long known and approved, any new and untried scheme. The tests of experience, and the sanctions of time, are not to be disregarded. Important discoveries may, it is true, yet be made ; but this by no means proves, that every thing is floating in uncertainty ; that nothing has reached its *acme* ; that all the antecedent generations of men were fools. After all, there is not commonly so much difference in systems, particularly in those that concern education, as is sometimes imagined. Often have we detected an old thing, under the guise of a novel and high-sounding name ; and there are doubtless many people of refinement among us, too proud to take lessons in Reading and Writing, who would nevertheless jump at an opportunity to learn Chirography and Elocution !

No new plans, of teaching or of learning how to read, are now submitted to you, Mr. President, for the very plain reason, that the old ones are judged to be all-sufficient, and no better can be conceived of. There will be little need of further discoveries in this art, if instructors will faithfully avail themselves of means which have been long provided ; if they will but aspire to be “ teachers of words, and not hearers only.” By precept and by example, much may be accomplished in *this*, as in all other departments of learning, nor

should the young be considered more competent to instruct themselves in Elocution, than in Grammar and Arithmetick.

Not all persons, it may be confessed, are "apt to *teach*;" but all persons *may be taught*. The instructor who occasionally reads to his pupils, will find *himself* in the way of improvement. By exposing himself to their observation and criticism, in this way, he will be stimulated to greater exertions, and aim at higher qualifications. "Thou that teachest another, teachest thou not thyself?"

It was no part of the plan adopted in this brief lecture, Mr. President, to treat, even were the ability not wanting, of the higher matters which relate to Elocution. These involve considerations of sufficient importance to demand a more elaborate treatise from an abler hand. To commence with the foundation, and to lay one stone upon another, till the edifice, how humble soever, should be complete, was the object kept steadily in view, rather than exterior embellishment and fanciful decoration. What is merely ornamental and showy, will pass away : what is of substantial advantage, and of practical utility, may be expected to endure.

